



Fort Carson-MEDDAC News

Soldiers in transition: A parks partnership making it work

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Master Sgt. Tim Thompson is making the move from protecting Uncle Sam to preserving Mother Nature.

"I want my kids to have this. I want them to go to Yellowstone. These are the things that mean something," said the Fort Carson Warrior Transition Battalion Soldier, gesturing at the Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument.

Thompson landed in the Fort Carson Warrior Transition Battalion after seven tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. While the primary goal of the WTB Soldiers is to heal, their secondary mission is to transition and Thompson said that can be difficult.

"I went from the constant pace of the military and war to standing still. I had to figure out what to do with myself," he explained.

Enter the Post to Parks program at the Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument, in Florissant, Colo. The Park's local outreach was initially created to welcome military families and youth in the Pikes Peak Region. As part of the program, Park Facilities Manager Troy Fuhrman sometimes hands out free park passes on Fort Carson.

"I was there handing out access passes and he (Thompson) walked up and said, 'That's it. That's what I want to do,'" Fuhrman remembered.

Through the joint work of Post to Parks and Operation Warfighter, a program that places wounded service members in internships, Thompson and his service dog, Tanner, arrived in Florissant.

Park Superintendent Keith Payne said it was more than just an opportunity for the park to support veterans. Thompson's combat construction engineer expertise has helped the park save thousands of dollars as they build a new visitor center.

Thompson recalled his first few weeks in the internship. "I threw everything into this. Then, they told me to (slow down and) make sure to take care of myself and heal. I've had to learn how to transition into a civilian environment."

Fuhrman smiled, "It's as basic as letting an old first sergeant know that office etiquette means he can't yell a name down the hall. Using the phone or walking to the room is what we do."



Not everyone is so accommodating or understanding. Some civilian organizations have expressed concern about helping veterans shift into the workforce. A Society of Human Resources report found 46 percent of surveyed employers believe mental issues would be a deterrent in hiring veterans.

Thompson said it's no surprise to him that many in the civilian world still need to make progress in reducing the stigma of hiring veterans with war wounds.

Parks officials said they've kept the lines of communication open, figuring out what Thompson is comfortable discussing. Both sides agree that veterans don't want people to fear them or feel sorry for them. Thompson said they just want a chance to prove themselves.

Fuhrman said, "They're just people put into extraordinary circumstances. They have unique skill sets. They understand mission and service. The key is to make them feel welcome and make it comfortable for everyone."

Since Thompson's arrival, the Florissant Park has expanded its partnership with the WTB. Fuhrman and Payne said it is rewarding to show veterans the wide variety of jobs available in the U.S. National Parks Service and help them translate military skills into civilian life.

"On a personal level and on a professional level, this is an outstanding program. It's turned into something we never anticipated with a huge payoff. It's self-serving," emphasized Payne.

Training at the Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument has helped three WTB Soldiers, including Thompson, earn permanent jobs with the U.S. National Parks Service. Six others have already been accepted into internship slots.

Thompson will soon begin work at the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia.

His internship supervisors said they'll be getting someone with a great work ethic, an eagerness to serve and one other important attribute.

"He looks great in grey and green," said Payne.

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